

The Art of Shooting Blue:

Basic Techniques for Using Natural Light

by Ethan Daniels

So you've seen articles like this before, I know, but give me a crack at enlightening you with a few of my tricks. I promise not to try and sell filters, film, flashcards, cameras, doohickies, or thingamajigs to you. All I want to do is impart some very basic, common sense, and easy-to-do ideas that may assist your photography.

Too many would-be underwater photographers are adamant about using artificial light on each and every shot they take. You see every major professional photographer carry a gigantic housing, along with at least one, and usually two stadium lights attached. To give these people their credit, they do know when and where to use those strobes. This article is being written to refute the case for what I call "over-strobing," the use of staged light too often. Don't get me wrong, there are many practical uses and cases in which strobe light is warranted. On the other hand, there are also a plethora of possibilities of shooting with pure, unadulterated, natural light waves (or photons) direct from our nearest star, the sun.

If you remember waaaayyy back to your earliest physics class (or if you can't dig that deep into your

memory, then try thinking of your open water class) you learned that light hits our planet in waves. To over-simplify the issue, the frequency of those light waves determine what colors you see, i.e. red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet (ROYGBIV). The ocean filters certain light waves out, beginning with red, then orange, yellow, and so on the deeper you get until there is no light and there's nothing to see. So, as you descend during a dive fewer colors are apparent.

Twenty meters down you will see mostly blue light, that is if you're in clear, nutrient-free, tropical waters where natural light photography works best. Nutrient rich regions will have much more of a green cast to the water and using only natural light is more challenging, though certainly still applicable. Places like California's kelp forests are perfect for natural light images when visibility cooperates due to light beams that filter down through the canopy.

You understand that bit, now how does one go about creating a visually stimulating image with pure blueish light underwater? Since you're not relying on color to make your image



A Japanese "Jake" seaplane shot down during WWII makes another wonderful opportunity for a wide angle ambient light image. There are many angles that make this image pop but the one seen here is a classic. Taken on a bright morning dive with decent visibility, the aluminum plane glows with reflected light.

*Equipment: Nikonos V, Sea & Sea fisheye lens Exposure: 1/60th at f/8
Film: Fuji Velvia 50*

pop you need strong contrast. Timing your dive when there is strong sunlight and decent visibility is one way to get this effect. The stronger the light and the fewer particles in the water the more dramatic the contrast will be in the image, which is what you want. Also, the closer you are to the subject the deeper the contrast, which is why wide angle lenses like a 15mm or fisheye lens works wonders. If a super wide angle lens isn't in your quiver

then use a 20 mm or even a 28 mm. Each of these lenses has its advantage depending on the subject. A 28 mm or 35 mm could be used to fill the frame with a shark or eagle ray silhouette from a distance. Admittedly, shooting macro subject with natural light can be difficult due to the extremely small depth of field that is available. But, never say never. Come up with a beautiful natural light macro image and you'll be heralded around the



The silhouette of a diver and the forward kingpost of a WWII wreck, the Chuyo Maru. If my strobe fails, which it does with maddening frequency, I'm forced to shoot silhouettes. This was one of those days. Luckily both the sun and visibility were cooperating, plus I had a beautiful coral festooned WWII wreck to work with.

*Equipment: Nikonos V, Nikonos 15mm lens
Exposure: 1/90th at f/22 Film: Fuji Velvia 50*



Blue Holes in Palau is a beautiful example of a site that screams for super wide angle ambient light pictures. The cavern is so large it is difficult to fit all of it in with a 15mm lens. It is also important to have good visibility.

*Equipment: Nikonos V, Nikonos 15mm lens
Exposure: 1/30th at f/2.8 Film: Fuji Velvia 50*

world.

Cloudy days are not optimal for shooting with ambient light, though striking images can still be manufactured. For low light conditions, you'll need higher film speed, or greater ASA on your digital camera, but that's not a huge deal. Now that we're on the subject of film speed, let's also break a few rules here and use whatever speed you want. Ninety nine percent of the time I will load my camera with slow 50 ASA film due to the virtually non-existent grain and color that it produces. You'll hear from other sources that shooting natural light requires at least 200 ASA. Throw that recommendation out the window. In the tropics, where light intensity is strong and the water is nutrient-free, there's almost never a need for 200 ASA (except for deep dives, well over 30 meters) and I've never shot anything higher than 100 ASA even in California! For those of you who have actually caught up with today's digital technologies, it's a bit easier to experiment with different ASAs on the same dive. Using slow speed film, or a low ASA, only means that you'll have to either slow your shutter speed or open your aperture. Again, no big deal. If you're still using film, try some black and white some time, you'll be surprised at your product.

Alright, now you know to use whatever film you're most comfortable with. To be sure and get the exposure correct you can either learn through the painful process of trial and error, like I did, use a light meter (if you have the cash), or use some tricks of the trade. First, I will tell you that whatever you do, BRACKET a few shots. You never really know what is going to look best so either bracket using your aperture or the film speed dial (on a Nikonos). If an image is worth taking the time, energy, and compressed air to get, it's worth doing at least twice

while bracketing. A good friend of mine taught me this trick, using a Nikonos, with the shutter on automatic, bump your film ASA dial up to twice what the film speed actually is. If you're using 50 ASA, dial in at 100; if using 100 ASA, dial in at 200, etc. This works magic if the subject is below you swimming across a reef, or when shooting a wreck horizontally.

Now on to what you really want to read about, what type of subjects look best on film or a monitor in natural light. This short list may seem rather obvious to some, but I constantly watch divers shooting subjects without a strobe that will be blob-like and indefinable on film. Proper composition of a subject is key to producing a good photograph. I spend more time thinking about composition then I do about any other photography related issue. Not only is it critical to each image, but it's a lot of fun coming up with new and innovative ideas of how to position yourself and your subject.

The most frequently done natural light shot is the silhouette. A well positioned, powerful silhouette can be a defining image for a photographer. A few of my silhouettes sell better than all the rest of my library combined! If the sun can be incorporated into the shot it gives the subject more contrast and I can't overemphasize the importance of dark vs light.

When I think of the quintessential

ambient light image, I automatically think of a wreck. Wrecks are marine time capsules that when captured in a crisp natural light shot seem filled with history and ghost-ridden. A sense of nostalgia is attached to these timeless images, similar to black and white pictures of relatives that have been passed down for generations.

Another option when shooting natural light in an area where there are shallow caverns is to focus on light streaming down from above. A perfect example of this is Blue Holes in Palau where three holes in the reef flat allow light beams to fill a large limestone cavern with blue light.

Large animals like sharks, rays, and people can make impressive natural light shots either as a silhouette, against a reef wall, swimming over a wreck, or on top of a clean, sandy bottom. Generally, I shoot all of these subjects with slow, 50 ASA film, at 1/60 at varying f-stops depending on the angle.

One last bit of advice, don't be afraid of breaking any of those strict photography rules you read in magazines or books! Finding new and innovative ways of shooting subjects is part of the magic of photography so don't pay attention to those who dwell on saying "you must do this, you must do that..." Go out on your next dive and break all of the u/w photography commandments! No one is grading you on the images that don't work,



A Spotted eagle ray, Aetobatis narinari, glides into the sun. It's important, when shooting straight up, to know where your bubbles are. It helps to be swimming into a bit of current because your exhaust is swept away. I didn't have to get that close to this animal because I had a 28 mm lens on the camera.

Equipment: Nikonos V, Nikonos 28mm lens Exposure: 1/90th at f/22 Film: Fuji Velvia 50

so experiment and analyze what you come up with. Remember, you learn through doing. Oh yeah, one more time, BRACKET!



An unusual all black Manta birostris swimming over a shallow reef. This was only a tough shot because of how difficult it was to catch up with the manta from above. The key here was getting close without spooking the ray. Never look an animal in the eye as they seem to find that intimidating. I drained my tank fairly quickly on this dive huffing and puffing trying to stay up in the water column with a knot and a half of current.

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